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Once upon a time

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Once upon a time ... (Expository Times book review no. 3624)

Darwin's theory of biological evolution by natural selection has proved immensely successful, leading to attempts to apply it to a wide range of natural phenomena (including religion). A long-standing problem with this theory has been why, if evolution is driven by the competitive survival of individuals, creatures expend time and energy co-operating with one another, when such co-operation might lead to one individual abusing the generosity of another. In *God is Watching You: How the fear of God makes us human* (Oxford University Press 2016, £18.99, pp. x + 286, ISBN: 978-0-19-989563-2) Dominic Johnson proposes a 'supernatural punishment theory' to offer simultaneously, from within an evolutionary paradigm, both a resolution of the problem of co-operation and an account of what is perceived be a universal feature of religions. Essentially, his argument is that fear of supernatural punishment has proved evolutionarily successful in enabling people to co-operate with one another in societies.

There is necessarily a good deal about Johnson's account that is speculative (two of the commonest constructions in his book are 'this may ...' and 'this suggests ...'), such that one wonders about the extent to which the elegance of the evolutionary paradigm is inspiring the shaping of data to fit it. This certainly appears to be the case from the theological point of view. Johnson mines the Bible selectively in search of 'proof texts' for his views (e.g. pp. 69-70, 72), and he is not above wilfully misinterpreting it (for example, stating that 'Jesus' call to "love thy neighbour" ... seems to have been a call to direct help and generosity to other people *within the in-group*' (p. 181), when it is clear from Luke 10: 25ff. that the point being made is precisely the opposite of this). Theological references are often cited from the 'Wycliffe Dictionary of Theology', which describes itself as offering a 'conservative evangelical perspective': presumably this resource has been selected for its fit with Johnson's ideas.

Just how scientific are those ideas? Following Popper, a scientific theory is commonly thought of as one that is falsifiable. Johnson notes that not all religions accord importance to ideas of supernatural punishment (p. 92); but he claims that this does not disconfirm his theory because variation in religious ideas is necessary for processes of natural selection to take place. Could anything, then, ever falsify this theory?

Johnson asserts at the outset that his 'is not a just-so story' (p. 8): this reviewer remains unconvinced.

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